



FACT SHEET

Online Self-Help Center Q&A

www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp/

On January 1, 2003, the Judicial Council of California, the governing body of the California court system chaired by the Chief Justice, launched an updated version of the nation's most comprehensive court-sponsored online self-help center for court users who do not have attorneys. This new link to the courts for self-represented litigants and others wishing to be better informed about the law and various court procedures helps achieve the council's goal of ensuring meaningful court access for all Californians. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the council's staff agency, maintains the center.

What is the purpose of this Web site?

California courts are seeing a surge in self-represented litigants, a trend that shows no sign of abating. The California Courts Online Self-Help Center provides a comprehensive selection of information, tools, and resources relevant to the kinds of legal information most sought by self-represented litigants. The Web site is designed to help those without attorneys become better informed, more successfully navigate the court system, and have more realistic expectations about the legal system. Although a wealth of legal information and resources is provided, this site does not interpret the law, predict results, or provide legal advice on individual cases.

Why is this site important?

Self-represented litigants often are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms, as well as with their rights and obligations, which leaves them disadvantaged in court. The new on-line Self-Help Center provides self-represented litigants with quick access to the most comprehensive information about many basic court procedures, resources, referrals to legal services programs, lawyer referral services, and other assistance. The information provided is of a scope not available elsewhere. Most Californians (76 percent) use a computer at home, work, or school, and 65 percent say they use the Internet.

What are some key features of this Web site?

The site contains over 800 pages designed specifically to help self-represented litigants navigate the court system. Users of the site can find out about free and low-cost legal assistance, alternative dispute resolution, bringing a lawsuit, filling out court forms, and locating additional resources and information. The site also offers information about specific topics, including family law, domestic violence, juvenile law, guardianship, elder

law, landlord/tenant issues, small claims, and traffic. The site also includes many links to other useful Web sites.

Can I ask specific questions?

All files in the online Self-Help Center can be searched using a specific word or phrase. The AOC welcomes comments, suggestions, and reports of technical problems and will use such feedback to improve the site. However, questions seeking legal advice or an interpretation of the law are beyond the scope of the assistance available from the Self-Help Center.

Who are self-represented litigants?

There is no one particular type of self-represented litigant. Without affordable access to legal services, more and more people are choosing to represent themselves. A large number of self-represented litigants are indigent, according to the National Center for State Courts. Others choose to proceed without an attorney when their cases do not appear to be complex. Many self-represented litigants, due to the particular circumstances of their cases, may have varied needs for assistance. Some need a simple procedure explained or assistance completing court forms while others may need more intensive and case-specific services to assist them in the litigation process.

How many self-represented litigants are there?

According to data collected by the Administrative Office of the Courts:

- The majority of the 6 million annual traffic filings involve self-represented litigants.
- All of the nearly 400,000 annual small claims filings involve self-represented litigants.
- Of the estimated 94,500 child custody mediation cases handled by California courts each year, at least half involve a self-represented parent.
- Fewer than 16 percent of child support cases involve parents who are both represented by attorneys. Neither parent has representation in more than 63 percent of such cases.
- Ninety-seven percent of proceedings processed through the local child support agency involve at least one self-represented parent.

What does the law say about representing yourself in court?

California law does not require an adult court user to be represented by an attorney. In small claims cases, the law expressly prohibits a litigant from having an attorney.

What help has been available in California in the past?

A variety of assistance programs have been developed by the Judicial Council and the courts as well as bar associations and legal services offices. These programs are summarized in a companion fact sheet entitled "Programs for Self-Represented Litigants".